

# Child Soldiers



Young soldiers of Zairian rebel army, Goma, Zaire, 1997.

My team of United Nations (UN) military observers entered a village to meet with a Sudanese Colonel who was responsible for reducing the number of weapons available to the civilian population in his area of control. As we entered the grass-walled army compound we could see a number of uniformed troops squatting under nearby trees and along the sides of buildings in an attempt to escape the mid-day sun. We were directed towards a group of white plastic lawn chairs positioned in a circle under a large acacia tree on the bank of the Nile River. There we were met by the Colonel and his staff. After exchanging pleasantries and introductions, the



A young soldier,  
Cambodia, 1997. Ou

It was common in Sudan to see soldiers' families living near military bases, but what struck me about this boy was his uniform and the fact that he was carrying a weapon. I couldn't help but notice that this young boy's uniform fit him perfectly. I was used to seeing adult soldiers with poorly fitted and mixed uniforms, and couldn't help wondering who makes combat uniforms for children? I began explaining the purpose of our visit when the young soldier returned, holding a bottle of pop in one hand and his AK-47 in the other. As he approached to give me a bottle of orange Fanta, he stumbled and exhaled a heavily alcohol scented breath. Quickly recovering, the soldier stood up with an apologetic look

# Key Facts

- In 2020 alone, explosive weapons and explosive remnants of war were responsible for at least 47 per cent of all child casualties.
- Between 2005 and 2020, **more than 104,100 children were verified as killed or maimed** in situations of armed conflict, with more than two-thirds of these verified since 2014.
- Between 2005 and 2020, more than **93,000 children were verified as recruited** and used by parties to conflict, although the actual number of cases is believed to be much higher.
- Between 2005 and 2020, at least **25,700 children were verified as abducted** by parties to conflict.
- The United Nations verified at least **14,900 incidents of denial of humanitarian access for children** between 2005 and 2020, with eighty per cent of those verified cases taking place from 2016 to 2020.
- Between 2005 and 2020, parties to conflict raped, forcibly married, sexually exploited, and committed other grave forms of **sexual violence against at least 14,200 children**.
- Sexual violence disproportionately affects **girls, who were victims in 97 per cent of cases** from 2016 to 2020. (Source : UNICEF) <sup>3</sup>

*When the German army was retreating in the face of the Allied advance in 1944, as a leader in the Hitler Youth, I was told I had been put in charge of several fighting units made up of 600 - 800 adolescents. I was to replace a veteran of World War I who had been moved to help set up defences on the Rhine. 'That's impossible,' I responded, 'I'm not quite 17.'*

*– a German child soldier*

# Why do children become combatants?

Discuss :

- In your opinion, why do armed forces or groups want to use children in armed conflict?
- Why would a young person join an armed force or group?

## Why Commanders Want Them :

- they don't ask questions; they follow orders
- they can be easily controlled
- they can be made martyrs
- need for fighters
- they are not fully aware of the risks

# Why Young People Might Join Or Be Recruited

- revenge, anger
- no parental/family support
- self-protection
- poverty, means of survival
- their societies value warfare, heroism, martyrdom
- peer pressure



# Forced to Fight - Tam's Story

Tam, a 13-year-old boy in Southeast Asia, lives in an area where two armed groups are fighting. He has a friend in a neighbouring village named Rafi who was hurt in an attack and who urges Tam to join the opposing group with him. Tam's village is destroyed, his father killed and his sister taken. In an effort to find his sister, he winds up at the camp of the group Rafi has joined. They are forced to work in various capacities and eventually to kill, aided by the drugs they are made to consume. Must he do what he knows is wrong, or risk death himself trying to escape and find his sister?

# Instructions

Go to [www.forcedtofight.ca](http://www.forcedtofight.ca) and select the appropriate options (Student, over 13, Tam's Story).

As a group or individual, work through the story, discussing your options and making choices as you go.

Go back through the simulation, making different choices until all options have been tried.

# Debrief

- How was Tam affected by the armed conflict? Or... what did Tam experience?
  - What losses has he suffered?
  - What do you think the effect on Tam's community would be?
  - What immediate needs does he have? What needs does his family have? His community?
  - What sorts of humanitarian activities could meet those needs? •

What kinds of action might help people cope with the consequences of armed conflict?

- How did becoming a soldier affect Tam's life and his future, and Mai's and Rafi's lives and futures?
- Was the scenario an effective way of helping you understand the predicament of child soldiers?

# I Don't Want To Go Back



# Discuss

- What do you learn about the situation for children in war from the commander's remarks?
- Compare Tam's experience with those of other child soldiers—Comfort and Abraham from the video.

# Journal Entry

Write a journal entry (minimum 250 words) from the perspective of either Rafi or Mai five years after the scenario. Include some reflection on their experiences during the conflict and where life took them in the next five years.

Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (2000).

Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I) (1977).

Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II) (1977).

UNICEF - Protecting children in humanitarian action (2021).

United Nations General Assembly - Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (2021).

Vancouver Principles - On Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Children (2017).

# Resources

## **Books**

*A Long Way Gone* by Ishmael Beah

*War Child* by Emmanuel Jal

## **Films**

*Beasts of No Nation* on Netflix

*Grace, Milly, and Lucy* from National Film Board